

NUTRITION

Whole Grains: Reap the Rewards

Grains come in many shapes and sizes, from large kernels of popcorn to small quinoa seeds. They are a good source of complex carbohydrates, fiber, and various vitamins and minerals and are naturally low in fat.

Whole grains haven't had their bran removed by milling, making them better sources of fiber — the part of plant-based foods that your body doesn't digest. A diet high in fiber can help prevent constipation and can also help reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Whole grains are also important sources of vitamins and minerals, such as thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folate, selenium, zinc and iron. Choose the whole-grain versions rather than refined grains as much as possible.

Types of whole grains

Barley. This grain looks a little like rice and is a good, low-fat source of fiber. Look for hulled barley, which has more soluble fiber, protein, potassium and calcium than quick-cooking pearled barley.

Brown rice. Only the hull is removed during the processing of brown rice, so it has more fiber, vitamins and minerals than white rice. Brown rice is also chewier and has more flavor.

Buckwheat. Dried seeds of the buckwheat flower often are crushed into particles and roasted, or finely ground into flour. Buckwheat is commonly used as an ingredient in pancakes or Japanese soba noodles. Roasted buckwheat can also be cooked in kasha, a side dish. Buckwheat is higher in protein than are other grains such as wheat and oats. It also contains phytochemicals — a group of compounds that may help prevent chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes.

Bulgur. Sometimes called cracked wheat, bulgur is wheat kernels that have been steamed, dried and then cracked into particles.

Flaxseed. This grain has unique nutrients that may prove particularly beneficial to your health. Flaxseed is a good source of lignans, a phytoestrogen that may reduce your risk of some types of cancer. Flaxseed is also a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids — a type of fat that may lower your risk of heart disease. Flaxseed should be ground before eating so that your body can better absorb the nutrients.

Millet. Millet has a strong, nutty flavor and is relatively easy to digest. It provides niacin, thiamin, phosphorus, zinc and some amounts of iron. Many varieties of millet exist worldwide, including common millet, foxtail millet, teff and sorghum.

Quinoa. An ancient Incan food, quinoa (ki-NO-uh) has more minerals — such as calcium, magnesium and potassium — than other grains. Quinoa is a good substitute for rice, and you can use quinoa flour as a replacement for white flour in baked goods.

